



*Commonwealth of Massachusetts*  
*Executive Office of Health and Human Services*  
*Department of Transitional Assistance*


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**Online Guide Transmittal 2020-27**  
**March 18, 2020**

**To:** Department of Transitional Assistance Staff  
**From:**  Sarah Stuart, Associate Commissioner for Change Management  
**Re:** Cross Programs: Temporary Emergency Operations Due to COVID-19

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**Overview**

On March 10, 2020 a State of Emergency was declared by Governor Baker to support the Commonwealth's response to the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

DTA is taking steps to ensure that active clients do not experience a disruption in benefits and prioritizes new applications.

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**Purpose**

The purpose of this Online Guide Transmittal is to advise staff of temporary adjustments due to COVID-19. These changes include:

- procedural changes;
  - prioritization of certain case work;
  - systems enhancements;
  - modified front-end services; and
  - changes to staff schedules.
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## Procedural Changes

Work related to pending SNAP, TAFDC and EAEDC applications are the priority. Due to these extraordinary circumstances, certain procedures are being temporarily revised to streamline and expedite the processing of cases.

All staff are to adhere to the following modified procedures until further notice:

- Cases with only optional verification(s) outstanding are to be wrapped up without the optional factor(s) immediately.
  - Cases pending outstanding mandatory verification(s) must be reviewed to determine if other reasonable documentation or data source could be used to verify the outstanding element. If no such verification is available, **a series of three cold calls must be made** to attempt to advise the client to submit the necessary proofs as soon as possible, preferably through DTACConnect.
  - With widespread school closures the EDUC-1, CCE and Learnfare forms will be particularly difficult for clients to have completed. Collateral contact and self-declarations are to be used if traditional verifications are not immediately available. Clients may complete the form(s) themselves or submit a self-declaration that includes all relevant information from the form(s).
  - TAFDC pre-benefit activities are suspended. This includes both PBJS and Orientation attendance.
  - Clients wishing to apply for TAFDC or EAEDC will be directed to contact the local office directly to initiate a telephonic application. It is no longer necessary to refer these clients to the Ombuds office.
  - No appointments are to be scheduled except for application and recertification/reevaluation interviews. Staff are reminded that a cold call **must** be made prior to scheduling an appointment. All interviews are to be telephonic. If you have a client without a working phone number, with an in-office ADA accommodation, or with HLS please contact the Ombuds office.
  - If a client states they are not able to meet program requirements due to health and safety concerns or a lack of childcare related to COVID-19 they must be granted good cause for 30 days. This includes but is not limited to requirements such as participation and medical evaluations. If you are not sure about granting good cause please contact the Procedural mailbox.
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**Procedural  
Changes  
(cont.).**

- Participation in employment service and training activities that were countable prior to any program operational changes remain countable activities for work participation purposes across all programs. For example, a TAFDC client who was meeting their work program requirement by attending college whose school has moved to online classes due to COVID-19 will still be able to meet participation with those online classes. No new online schools are being approved at this time.
- Clients applying for EAEDC as a disabled individual may self-declare that their disability is expected to last 60 days or more and that it substantially reduces or eliminates their ability to support himself or herself. A Disability Supplement is not required. TAFDC clients may also self-declare disability. Caretaker status for both programs may also be self-declared as documentation from medical providers will be difficult at this time.

Many clients are hourly employees and have begun reporting that they are currently impacted by closures. If based on the information available in the client's ECF we know a client to be an hourly worker and that their place of employment is closed you must update their wages as \$0.00, do **not** terminate the employment. Staff must use the public facing information available about employers. Do not request verification from the client unless there is no public facing information to confirm the closure. With permission, staff must be sure to explore collateral contacts to expedite the verification process as well. As always, encouraging clients to submit verifications via DTACConnect to ensure these verifications are processed as quickly as possible. Once you confirm that the client's place of employment has closed mark the \$0.00 income as verified, detail the circumstances in the narrative, and wrap the case up if there are no other mandatory verifications outstanding.

If it is a new application and this same information can reasonably be determined, proceed as above.

**Important:** In all cases, a detailed narrative summarizing the action taken must be entered. If client contact is made, staff must take the opportunity to explain that we are attempting to ensure that benefits are available to them given the spread of COVID-19 in the Commonwealth.

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**Systems  
Changes**

To ensure that active clients do not experience a disruption in benefits and do not receive notices that may be confusing, modifications to BEACON are being made.

Actions for FAW are being reprioritized. Regardless of the Action type staff must evaluate where the client is in the application/reinstatement/review process and take the appropriate steps to conduct the interview or follow the verifications related instructions on the previous page.

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**TAO  
Operations**

Effective Wednesday, March 18, 2020 all TAOs will be closed to the public. This change is being made as a safety measure for all and to expedite case processing.

TAO office hours for core staff will be 8:00 a.m. to 6:00p.m. Monday through Friday. Staff will be assigned to rotating shifts of a minimum of 7.5 hours to comport to social distancing recommendations.

It is critical, with the change in public access, that each TAO's main number is staffed at all times and that staff are being responsive to client's phone calls.

Clients often visit a TAO to quickly get a new or replacement EBT card. To mitigate the time it takes for a client to receive an EBT card, cards requested on or after March 16<sup>th</sup> will be locally printed and mailed to clients from their TAOs. Case managers must be sure to advise client of how to PIN their card and to review the EBT brochure with new clients. Each envelop must include an:

- EBT brochure;
- insert with instructions on how to set up a PIN;
- multilingual card; with
- the EBT card

A special EBT signature sheet and CIS processes will be used to ensure accuracy and integrity.

Local office managers and Regional Directors will coordinate support for offices with greater EBT request volume.

Secure document drop off options for clients are in process of being developed for those who cannot use DTACconnect or mail to the Document Processing Center.

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**Communication**

DTA is using many available means to efficiently communicate with clients and stakeholders to mitigate as much confusion as possible.

Information will be communicated via:

- DTA Connect mobile app push notification;
- Automated calls and/or text messaging;
- Updates to DTA's website;
- Message on DTA Assistance Line, SAO, CCMO, Ombuds and local office lines.
- Posters at local offices;
- Banner message on DTA Connect portal for applicants or those accessing case information;
- Social media; and
- Correspondence with community partners, legislators and sister agencies.

Clients should be encouraged to check DTA's website for updates as we expect high call volume during this time.

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**Questions**

If you have any policy or procedural questions, after conferring with the appropriate TAO personnel, please have your Systems Information Specialists or TAO management email them to DTA.Procedural Issues.

Systems issues should be directed to the Systems Support Help Desk.

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